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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 002029

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [NATO](#) [GR](#) [MK](#)
SUBJECT: GREECE/MACEDONIA: NIMETZ' REMARKS ON ALEXANDER THE
GREAT GALL ATHENS

Classified By: Political Counselor Robin omoter
of democracy and civic life" prompted reaction from Greek
leaders from all political stripes. Most have criticized
Nimetz' remarks, and called his impartiality into question.
Nimetz' remarks have not generated concomitant reactions in
Skopje. The incident illustrates the sensitivities of the
sides on the issues of historical claim to Alexander's legacy
-- and Macedonia. Embassies Skopje and Athens suggest
follow-up with Nimetz to ascertain his plans to manage the
fall-out from this incident and for further engagement with
the parties in the coming months. End Summary.

Alexander the Great (or was he?)

¶3. (U) Greek media prominently reported on impromptu remarks
made by UN Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General for the
Greece-FYROM Talks, Matthew Nimetz, in an interview with
Macedonian daily "Dnevnik." When asked about the decision by
Macedonian authorities to rename the Skopje Airport after
Alexander the Great, Nimetz responded:

"Regarding the airport's name, I will say that I personally
am not the greatest admirer of Alexander the Great, although
I know that this may cause criticisms in both states. He was
certainly a great conqueror, but he massacred thousands of
people and destroyed many towns. He was not a promoter of
democracy and civic life, and, in my view, he did not leave
behind the most positive long-term empire. It therefore
appears strange that there is such a competition over his
origin with negative consequences in the 21st century,
thousands of years after his death. Yet, this is an
absolutely logical view, which most probably bears no real
weight. I prefer to look ahead, not back. I believe that
the people of the region have the opportunity to build new
relations and strong democratic and economic prosperity
within the Euro-Atlantic frames, but only if they work
together and leave some of these historical issues behind."

Don't Know Much About History

¶4. (U) Nimetz' remarks immediately dominated civil discourse
in Athens; daily talk shows hosted angry academics taking
exception to Nimetz' version of Alexandrian history.
Politicians from across the spectrum criticized Nimetz'
remarks. FM Dora Bakoyannis opined, "the historical
contribution of Alexander the Great has been recognized for
thousands of years now, and history cannot be rewritten and
is not rewritten. That's my first comment. The second
comment I have is that we are talking in terms of the future
with regard to issues concerning our region, and not in terms
of the past. I want to make that clear." Antenna TV termed
Nimetz a "clown" and questioned his ability to mediate the
Skopje name issue "given that he has such views."

¶5. (U) Less restrained reactions included Thessaloniki Governor Psomiadis, who furiously noted "in a critical stage of the Skopje issue, unhistoricist Mr. Nimetz is too little to be able to refer to the liberator of the peoples and one of the greatest Hellenes, Alexander." And, perhaps least restrained, far-right party LAOS issued a statement that noted "in areas razed by Americans such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, Alexander the Great is still adored as a God. If Mr. Nimetz wants to talk about butchers let him tell us who eliminated a race, the Indians, from earth."

A More Blase Skopje

¶6. (U) Nimetz,s critical comments evoked no significant reaction in Skopje. Local press carried his statement without comment, and GOM contacts did not express any irritation over his remarks. One high-level contact even told us he agreed with Nimetz,s assessment of Alexander the

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Great. Comment: In general, Nimetz is viewed by Macedonians as a fair, balanced mediator in the name dispute. End comment.

Comment: Now What?

¶7. (C) This incident again illustrates the sensitivities in the region related to Alexander the Great's legacy -- including the claim to "Macedonia." Although the Greek reaction may appear hyperbolic, it is indicative of the passion with which the Greeks claim Alexander and his legacy, and reflects a Balkan tradition of zero-sum assessments of historical phenomena.

¶8. (C) Embassies Skopje and Athens recommend Washington or New York interlocutors follow-up with Nimetz. Specifically, it would be useful to ascertain his plans to manage the fall-out from this incident. We would also welcome any insights into his plans for further engagement with the parties in the coming months as the issues of the legacy of "Macedonia" become more timely in the lead-up to NATO decisions on enlargement. End Comment.
COUNTRYMAN